The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab

Dr Orly Maya Stern
The Invisible Women of al-Shabaab:

Understanding the role of women in, and their influence on sons, husbands and brothers in, the processes of joining al-Shabaab, defecting from al-Shabaab, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Written by: Dr Orly Maya Stern
Rehabilitation Support Team
Adam Smith International
September 2019

The release of this research
This research was released internally, two weeks before a female suicide bomber, assisted by another woman, killed seven government officials in Mogadishu, Somalia, on the 24th July 2019 – including among them, the Mayor of Mogadishu, Mr. Abdirahman Omar Osman.

Since then, there have been further reports of bombings and assassinations perpetrated by al-Shabaab's women in Banaadir, as well as in other regions in Somalia. These increased attacks have made it clear that women in al-Shabaab are a group that can no longer be ignored.

Acknowledgements
The author is extremely grateful to the Federal Government of Somalia counterparts, the dedicated and hardworking staff in Mogadishu and Baidoa, and their colleagues from the Rehabilitation Support Team for all their support in facilitating the research for this report. She cannot mention these individuals by name for security reasons, but she knows who they are.

The author would also like to thank Katya Lvova, Sif Heide-Ottoosen, Dion Mark Williams, Jamie Kalil, Jean-Christophe Goussaud and Peter Olowo, the Serendi programme donors, for their support during the time of the research, as well as their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this report.
Table of Contents

Table of Acronyms .................................................................................................................. 3
1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 4
2. Methodology ......................................................................................................................... 6
   Research limitations .............................................................................................................. 7
   The National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants ........ 8
3. The al-Shabaab war and women ............................................................................................ 9
   al Shabaab ........................................................................................................................... 9
   Life for women in al-Shabaab-controlled territory ............................................................... 10
   Al-Shabaab and women, internationally .............................................................................. 12
4. Female ‘membership’ in al-Shabaab: The numbers ............................................................... 13
5. Women’s recruitment into al-Shabaab .................................................................................. 14
6. Women’s roles in al-Shabaab ............................................................................................... 16
   Where women live and serve when they are in al-Shabaab ................................................ 20
7. Al Shabaab wives .................................................................................................................. 20
   Forced marriage in al-Shabaab’ ......................................................................................... 21
   Al-Shabaab arranging wives ............................................................................................... 22
   Wife inheritance ................................................................................................................... 23
   Difference between female members and wives ................................................................... 24
8. Abduction and sexual violence ............................................................................................. 25
   Abductions ........................................................................................................................... 25
   Sexual violence .................................................................................................................... 25
9. Women’s lives when husband and sons are in al-Shabaab ................................................... 26
10. Family contact ...................................................................................................................... 27
    Phone use ........................................................................................................................ 28
    Salary payments ............................................................................................................... 28
11. Female defectors ................................................................................................................. 29
    Why do women leave al-Shabaab? .................................................................................... 29
    What happens to women once they leave the group? ......................................................... 30
    NISA’s screening of women ............................................................................................... 32
    What rehabilitation facilities exist for women? ................................................................. 34
    Challenges women face post defection ............................................................................. 35
12. What is the best way to assist these women? ...................................................................... 36
    Is there a need to assist women? ....................................................................................... 36
    What is the best way to assist women? .............................................................................. 38
13. Women playing a part in men’s defection ........................................................................... 40
    Women providing logistic support for defection .............................................................. 41
    Assisting women in promoting defection ........................................................................ 42
14. Life for women after their men defect .................................................................................. 42
15. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 43
16. Recommendations ............................................................................................................... 44
17. Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 46
18. Interviewees ........................................................................................................................ 48
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMISOM</td>
<td>The African Union Mission in Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASI</td>
<td>Adam Smith International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CID</td>
<td>Criminal Investigation Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRD</td>
<td>Centre for Research and Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDR</td>
<td>Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRP</td>
<td>Defector’s Rehabilitation Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCA</td>
<td>Finn Church Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGS</td>
<td>Federal Government of Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender Based Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organisation for Migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOIS</td>
<td>Ministry of Internal Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NISA</td>
<td>National Intelligence Security Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RST</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Support Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNA</td>
<td>Somali National Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPF</td>
<td>Somali Police Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN DDR</td>
<td>United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

The study of militant groups tends to be male-focussed, centring on male recruits, male participation and men’s passage in and out of fighting groups. Men are viewed in isolation, detached from their families and communities. In this vein, the study of al-Shabaab has centred primarily on its men – as have the interventions aimed at dealing with al-Shabaab; preventing recruitment from the group and encouraging defection. This focus obscures an important, yet often concealed part of the picture; The women associated with al-Shabaab.

The solitary focus on men fails to capture the part that women play in supporting al-Shabaab – those of the women who actively serve the group; the roles and influences of militant’s wives; the experiences of women forced into the group, and the parts that women play in encouraging men to defect. These understandings can provide valuable insights into how to better contest and degrade the group.

This study looks at women in Somali militant group, al-Shabaab. Broadly, it considers two distinct topics; First, it looks at women’s roles in al-Shabaab; their recruitment and participation in the group, and their defection, rehabilitation and reintegration back into civilian society – seeking to see how such women can and should be assisted. Second, the study seeks to understand the part that women play in men’s recruitment, participation and defection from the al-Shabaab, with a view to understanding how these roles can be instrumentalised to further promote men’s successful defection.

This study has been written as part of the work of Adam Smith International’s ‘Rehabilitation Support Team’ (RST). The RST, funded by a donor pooled fund, provides technical support to the Government of Somalia – primarily through its Defector’s Rehabilitation Programme (DRP), Ministry of Internal Security – for the defection and rehabilitation of former al-Shabaab militants. In particular, the RST provides support to a rehabilitation centre for male defectors in Mogadishu, called the Serendi rehabilitation centre.

Through RST’s work with male defectors, it has become increasingly clear that women play an important part in men’s processes into, through and out of the group; in allowing for their participation in the group, in encouraging and supporting their defection, and in facilitating their reintegration. It was felt that further understanding of the parts that women play in these processes, could be harnessed to facilitate and improve RST’s and DRP’s programming with men.

At the time of writing, there are operational rehabilitation centres for ‘low risk’ male defectors in Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayo.² There are no existing programmes for female defectors – although IOM is in the process of designing a limited programme for women associated with al-Shabaab. A key barrier to programming for women has been a lack of information about the extent to which women are actually actively involved with al-Shabaab; about what

---

¹ Those screened by the National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA), as being ‘low risk’ in terms of a formalized screening tool, discussed further below.
² The Baidoa and Kismayo centers are supported by the International Organization for Migration.
form this involvement takes; what numbers of women are affected; what type of rehabilitation and reintegration assistance is needed by women; and what the consequences of providing such assistance might be. This study hopes to fill some of these knowledge gaps, fleshing about what we know about women’s involvement with al-Shabaab.

**Which women is this study looking at?**

A key challenge in conducting a study on women in al-Shabaab, is determining which women should fall under the ambit of study. Considering the women associated with al-Shabaab, reveals blurring lines between various groupings of women;

- Women who are actually recruits or combatants, or who actively support the group – militarily or otherwise;
- Women who are in other ways associated with the group; as wives, abducted women or those coerced into involvement; and
- Women who have lived in al-Shabaab-occupied territory – and possibly (but not necessarily) have exhibited some level of support or acceptance of the group.

The distinctions between these groupings are frequently unclear, with evident overlap between them. If it is decided that programming is needed for women in al-Shabaab, this will need to grapple with these differences, thinking through how best to assist each category of women. While the male defector programme has centred on male ‘members’ of al-Shabaab – those who played a part in supporting the group – programming for women presents more difficult questions.

In particular, delineating female ‘members’ of the group, from ‘wives’, can be fraught with challenge. A male defector interviewed noted that, “Many of the female members were al-Shabaab wives also.” However, the research reveals that not all female members are married to al-Shabaab men, and not all wives are members. One defector put forward his view that; “It depends on the husband. Some husbands like their wives to serve the group. Others do not like it.” While some wives supported al-Shabaab, others said that they were vehemently opposed their husband’s participation, advocating continually for their defection. Yet others claimed to be entirely unaware that their husbands were even part of the group.

To deal with this problem, programming for women would need to clarify its purpose; whether it has a security rationale, hence supporting a focus on women actively involved with the group, or a more humanitarian goal, seeking to provide support to women who have been become entwined with the group and have suffered hardships as a result of trying to distance themselves. These two rationales will blur – the study demonstrates that helping to alleviate wives’ hardships, will likely encourage other women to leave, which will possibly make it easier for men to leave the group – which in turn has a security rationale. This problem is not

---

3 Some of these same difficulties exist with some male defectors, with many men being involved in al-Shabaab involuntarily, and many men playing non-military related task – some of who might inappropriately get caught up in the defector net. Felbab-Brown notes that. “… the stigma of the label “defector” may inappropriately penalise individuals who are better described as victims of the group. For instance, what about a cook who is running away from a village that has been under al Shabaab control? Should such a person be considered a defector or merely a victim seeking protection from the arriving AMISOM or Somali forces? He may well be deserving of rehabilitation aid, but should he be saddled with the label and stigma of “defector”? The Hard, Hot, Dusty Road to Accountability, Reconciliation, and Peace in Somalia, Vanda Felbab-Brown, May 2018.
unique to Somalia. In recognising this issue, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programming in other countries has often opted towards addressing the varied groupings of women together, rather than separating and tailoring assistance towards each. This is a question that will be returned to later in this report.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted over the course of a year, from mid-2018 to mid-2019. The writer of this report works as the Gender and Human Rights Advisor on the Rehabilitation Support Team. As such, in addition to the interviews and discussion groups conducted expressly for this study, many other meetings and engagements that formed a part of the writer's broader role for this project, also fed into this research.

Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders. These consisted of international actors – including those from the United Nations, militaries, embassy officials, international organisations and researchers – as well as a range of Somali representatives from government and civil society – including representatives from the Defector's Rehabilitation Programme, screeners from the National Intelligence Security Agency and other security actors. Interviews were held in Somalia, in both Mogadishu and Baidoa, as well as remotely by Skype where required.

In addition to key informants, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 23 male al-Shabaab defectors living in the ‘Serendi’ Rehabilitation Facility in Mogadishu. In addition, focus group discussions were held with low risk al-Shabaab defectors at a rehabilitation centre in Baidoa; as well as with high risk former al-Shabaab, serving sentences in a prison facility in Baido – taking part in a rehabilitation programme for high risk prisoners, run by Finn Church Aid (FCA) and CRD (Centre for Research and Dialogue).

In addition, two focus group discussions were held with wives of former al-Shabaab militants in Baidoa (one for the wives of high risk men, and another for the wives of low risk defectors). Interviews were also held with female family members of Serendi beneficiaries in Mogadishu, including mothers, wives and sisters of defectors.

Acknowledgement and appreciation is given to the staff of IOM, FCA, CRD and Serendi, for facilitating these interviews, as well as to the many others who agreed to be interviewed.

Research scope

This report focusses on adult Somali women involved with al-Shabaab. The research does not look at girls (those under the age of 18) involved with al-Shabaab, or at the rehabilitation of girls, although it is clear that girls are recruited into and leave from the group. This is an area that UNICEF is working on and studying.

Beyond a short sub-section below, the report also does not look at foreign women involved with al-Shabaab, both serving the group within or outside of Somalia. There is already a body

4 Jointly managed by the Government of Somalia and IOM.
of existing research on foreign women’s involvement with al-Shabaab. This report sought to address the notable gap in knowledge on Somali women’s engagement.

Research limitations
The greatest limitation of this research, was that the researcher was unable to access female al-Shabaab ‘members’ to talk to, meaning that the research relied largely on the testimony of al-Shabaab men, as well as their wives and female family members. Numerous efforts were made to identify and secure interviews with al-Shabaab women, however during the initial phase of this research, none could be secured. A second phase of research is being planned, during which it is anticipated that interviews with female former al-Shabaab members will be held, relying on leads generated during the first phase.

A number of factors made locating female former al-Shabaab members difficult. Somalia is still in a state of active conflict and is highly insecure. Foreigners working in Somalia have restricted access and movement. For the most part, international actors (as the writer of this report is) are restricted to secured zones or compounds, with travel outside of these zones limited. While steps were taken to locate female combatants to interview, the regular means by which a researcher might secure interviews were not available. It was not possible to go into the community to locate or talk to people, as might regularly be done, in the hope that interviews might organically develop and snowball. Rather, all interviews had to be pre-arranged, and needed to be held in secured locations. Women associated with al-Shabaab – who by virtue of their involvement with the group, had to some extent been in conflict with the law – would be reluctant to travel into areas secured by the military, police and security actors.

It was clear in conducting this research that people are wary to talk about al-Shabaab or about their experiences with the group. People are concerned about their own safety or the safety of relatives. This fear is not restricted to those whose families remain in al-Shabaab occupied areas; even those living in government-controlled parts of the country fear that al-Shabaab can reach and target them.

As this research will show, women leaving al-Shabaab have been able to more easily reintegrate back into communities than men have, due to the fact that most people in their communities did not know that they were ever involved with the group. While women may have supported the group actively, the research shows that many of them supported the group secretly from their homes, with their neighbours having little knowledge about their involvement. This differed from men who tended to go away to fight and live with the group. For women previously involved with al-Shabaab, their continued privacy and anonymity is critical to them. As such, informants explained, there would be great reluctance to being interviewed or to being identified in any way as being formerly involved with al-Shabaab.

Interviews with most Somali actors – most notably with al-Shabaab defectors and their family members – were conducted with the help of translators. In the text below, quotes from them are italicised. It should be noted however that the quotes are the approximate words the translator provided, rather than being the actual words of interviewees. Given the language barrier, the researcher was not able to gauge where the wording and meaning differed – which they sometimes likely did. Despite this, it was felt to be useful to include these quotes, as they paint an interesting picture of women’s participation in the group – and importantly, of the way in which men describe and perceive this.
A decision was made to not attribute particular quotes or points of information to specific interviewees. This decision was made for security reasons, given the sensitivities and possible risks in talking about these issues. A list of interviewees is included at the rear of this report. Material derived from other published pieces is footnoted and referenced.

This research relied on qualitative research and on personal testimony by a range of actors, providing their views on highly sensitive topics. Given the challenging research context and research constraints, the accuracy of many of these statements could not be verified, although efforts have been made to point out when ideas were frequently repeated – and so too, where they were entirely uncorroborated. It is possible that interviewees have misrepresented facts – for their own protection, for fear, or for a range of other motives. Despite this, their views remain highly revealing.

The National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants

As mentioned above, this study forms a part of the work of Adam Smith International's Rehabilitation Support Team, the team supporting the work of the Serendi Rehabilitation Centre in Mogadishu. To give context to the material below, the following is a short overview of the Federal Government of Somalia's National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants.

The defector’s programme has been created as a means with which to entice al-Shabaab members out of the group, in the hopes of ultimately degrading the group, as a way to promote peace. In terms of this programme, where ‘low risk’ members of al-Shabaab defect, they can claim amnesty from prosecution, be rehabilitated and reintegrated back into the society.

On defecting from the group, defectors are transferred to the National Security Intelligence Agency (NISA). Their trajectories differ; defectors might hand themselves in to NISA, be facilitated in this by family members, or be transferred to NISA by the Somali National Army (SNA), Somalia Police Force (SPF) or African Union's AMISOM troops, who they presented themselves to. NISA go on to screen defectors as either ‘high risk’ or ‘low risk’, using a screening tool designed for purpose. Those classified as ‘low risk’ can receive amnesty from prosecution and be sent to rehabilitation facilities, while those deemed ‘high risk’ are referred for prosecution by military courts and possible imprisonment.

Tailored rehabilitation centers for men have been established in Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa. At this time of writing, there are no existing rehabilitation facilities or pathways for women, discussed further below.
3. The al-Shabaab war and women

al Shabaab

_Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaideen_, commonly known as al-Shabaab, or 'the youth' is seeking to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state in Somalia and across the Horn of Africa. The group describes itself as waging war against "enemies of Islam", and is in active conflict with the Federal Government of Somalia and Federal Member States, and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). The group was formed as the militant wing and radical offshoot of the Union of Islamic Courts, which controlled Mogadishu in 2006. Al-Shabaab has occupied and controls large tracts of the country, imposing a strict version of Shari'ah law in the areas it controls. The group uses beheadings, amputations and stonings to punish those who do not abide with their version of Shari’ah. In 2012, the group pledged allegiance to al Qaeda.

Between 2012 and 2015, the SNA, AMISOM and various clan militias, with international support, pushed al-Shabaab from much of the urban territory it held, relegating the group to smaller and largely rural parts of the country. Since 2015 these gains have been somewhat diminished, as the SNA and AMISOM have struggled to hold onto cleared territory. Al-Shabaab today controls large sections of rural central and southern Somalia, as well as some major roads running through the country. Anzalone explains that, "Al-Shabaab continues to administer and govern territory, including through the continued operation of sharia courts, zakat and taxation collection and distribution, clan outreach, and the running of schools, sharia institutes, and programs providing agricultural, medical, and food aid, though on a notably diminished scale due to its territorial losses...". Al-Shabaab is not geographically confined to the areas it holds. It retains operational military capacity in other parts of the country, where it is able to conduct regular attacks, bombings and assassinations – including in Somalia’s capital city, Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab’s ‘Amniyat’ is the intelligence division of al-Shabaab – worth noting here because of the part that women play in this. The group has set up a countrywide network of informants and operatives, who gather intelligence, carry out assassinations and plan and stage suicide bombings. Secrecy is at the heart of the Amniyat’s success, and this has been achieved by ring-fencing the Amniyat from the rest of the organization. Amniyat members are feared –

---

a The groups ideology is a brand of Salafism and Wahhabism, supporting takfir, or excommunication of non-believers, Al-Shabab, Counter Extremism Project.
b Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab, Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, United States Military Academy, 2018.
c The Resilience of al-Shabaab, Christopher Anzalone, CTC Sentinel, April 2016.
and for al-Shabaab members, being chosen to join its ranks is an honour for which many compete.\textsuperscript{9}

Current al-Shabaab membership numbers are estimated at 6,000 members and about 30/40,000 “associated persons”. Al-Shabaab has attained significant levels of support from the population, a factor that has been critical in facilitating the group’s success. Notwithstanding its often-punitive approaches, al-Shabaab has brought a level of justice and order to the areas it controls – valued by many, when compared to the lawlessness preceding its arrival. Al-Shabaab are seen to provide fast, non-corrupt dispute resolution – in contrast with the formal judiciary, who are seen as corrupt and biased on clan status. Administrations of al-Shabaab-controlled cities function relatively well, when contrasted with a lack of state governance and administration in some government-held areas. Felbab-Brown notes that, “Perceptions towards individuals associated with al Shabaab vary enormously, ranging from acceptance to extreme ostracization. Views are often based on whether a community, clan or family’s experience with al Shabaab has predominantly been marked by brutality or the delivery of justice and protection services.”\textsuperscript{10} It is not only men who support the group – Somali women support them too. A defector explained that, “In places in which they operate, women who live in these areas, believe that al-Shabaab is the best; they are good people; they work with them; they provide them with things. It is better for the government to go to al-Shabaab areas and show them that government is better than al-Shabaab.”

Al-Shabaab is a highly decentralised group. While the group might have policies on various aspects of recruitment, such as leave, salary payments and phone use, the reality is that local commanders often dictate these things for those under their charge. This is one of the reasons for the often-contradicting and differing reports provided by various defectors.

The ongoing conflict in Somalia has caused changes in society and shifts in family dynamics. A report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, by the independent expert on human rights in Somalia, estimated that (as of 2011) 70 percent of Somali homes are female-headed households – in part due to the number of men lost to the conflict. This has left women as primary decision makers and income earners in their families, forced to engage in economic and other activities traditionally reserved for men.\textsuperscript{11}

**Life for women in al-Shabaab-controlled territory**

Al-Shabaab enforces an extreme form of Shari’ah\textsuperscript{12} law in the areas it rules. It has placed numerous restrictions on the actions of women, including bans on women working, or travelling with unrelated men, and strict clothing requirements.\textsuperscript{13} A woman interviewed, who had lived in Afgooye during al-Shabaab’s rule, explained, “There was no freedom. Women


\textsuperscript{10} The Hard, Hot, Dusty Road to Accountability, Reconciliation, and Peace in Somalia, Vanda Felbab-Brown, May 2018, at p135.

\textsuperscript{11} Somalia: The situation of women without male support, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa, 17 November 2011.

\textsuperscript{12} Shari’ah law is Islamic religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition, deriving from the religious precepts of Islam, particularly the Quran and the Hadith.

\textsuperscript{13} Women and Al-Shabab: Between False Empowerment and Terror, Anne-Yolande Bilala, August 13, 2012.
were forced to wear socks and hijabs. During prayer if someone walked out, they would kill him with sticks.”

Female interviewees in Baidoa described how when al-Shabaab controlled the city, women had to wear full body cover, including a full-face veil, socks and gloves. “If you stepped outside the door in the wrong clothes you would get into trouble.” One woman recalled that, “One day men caught me at my door, not wearing the full clothes. I was caned.” This has been reversed since Baidoa was taken over by government. An interviewee said that, “Now, you cannot wear veils in Baidoa. You will be shot if you do.” Another interviewee explained that many women have reportedly been arrested for this, but none killed – although one woman was said to have been shot at for this by government soldiers, narrowly escaping harm.

Interestingly, as well as an ideological motive for these rules, interviewees described an economic objective. Women in Baidoa explained that when al-Shabaab occupied the town, their affiliates arrived in Baidoa with a shipment of clothing, mandating that all women buy these – as without these clothes, women could not leave the house. One woman recalled how she and a group of seven other women lived in a house together. Between them, they could only afford three of these outfits. Over the four years that al-Shabaab held Baidoa, they had to share these three outfits between eight women, and each could only leave the house when they had one of them. The other five housemates had to remain at home, waiting their turn to use the clothes.

Women have to go to compulsory Islamic lectures, delivered by al-Shabaab. A woman who had been in al-Shabaab-occupied Baidoa explained, “Almost every day they taught 1000 women.” Often indoctrination lectures for women were delivered by other women. Those teaching these classes wore full face covering, so that community women were not aware of who they were, even in a small, close-knit place like Baidoa. One said, “Women who used to teach might be here, but you would never know.” Community women were forced to come to these sessions. “If you didn’t come, they would come looking for you.” Another added, “Al-Shabaab would tell people to come to the community square. There, they even slaughtered a man and threatened that this is what happens if you don’t support us. They made people watch.” One interviewee described how she would feed her children at 4am, before taking them to her mother’s house and spending the days in hiding, to avoid going to these sessions.

Women are not allowed to work or conduct business in al-Shabaab area – a challenge given the number of female-headed households in Somalia. Al-Shabaab considers women working to be un-Islamic, therefore banning women’s commercial activity, as a means by which to
limit contact between men and women. Women have struggled greatly as a result. A woman in Baidoa said, “Now, since government is here, there are soldiers here. You can go and wash clothes for them and you get money. But then, when al-Shabaab was here, you could not wash clothes for al-Shabaab. They did not even give you one dollar. They wear a green uniform; but they wash it themselves at night and wear it in the morning. There is nothing for the women to wash.” Here again, an economic motive is evident – with reports that bans on women working are means of extorting bribes from women who need to work to support themselves and their families.14

While al-Shabaab no longer rules Baidoa, the group’s return is not far from women’s minds. A woman explained, “We have kept these clothes, so that if al-Shabaab comes back we will still have these clothes to wear.”

Al-Shabaab and women, internationally

While this report focusses on women and al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Shabaab is also active outside of Somalia, where they have been responsible for a number of attacks and incursions. In 2012, after al-Shabaab pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, they began executing increased attacks in neighboring countries, particularly Kenya. As examples, al-Shabaab were responsible for the 2013 attack in Nairobi’s Westgate Mall, which killed 68 people. In 2015, five al-Shabaab fighters stormed Kenya’s Garissa University, killing 150 people. In January 2019, al-Shabaab attacked a luxury hotel in Nairobi, the DusitD2 hotel complex, killing 21 civilians.

Women’s involvement in al-Shabaab has extended beyond Somalia, although information on this remains sparse – mainly found through a scattering of media reports. In October 2016, two women in USA were convicted for organising a group of women, across eight countries, that funded al-Shabaab. So too, a 2014 article, reported the USA’s FBI arresting three women on charges of running a conspiracy to funnel money to al Shabaab.17 Even more female involvement has been seen closer afield in East Africa. A number of Kenyan and Tanzanian women have been charged in Kenya in connection with their involvement with al-Shabaab, with charges including being members of al-Shabaab, conspiracy to commit terrorism, aiding terrorists and concealing information about terrorists.18

14 Somalia: The situation of women without male support, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa, 17 November 2011.
15 Somalia: The situation of women without male support, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa, 17 November 2011.
16 Al-Shabab, Counter Extremism Project.
One more unusual report describes the ‘Mata Hari network’ in Kenya – a quite distinct way in which al-Shabaab reportedly utilizes women. In terms of this report, al-Shabaab buys information from sex workers in Nairobi – information that sex workers collect from their clients; often police officers, politicians or business men. This is particularly interesting, given al-Shabaab’s ideological positions relating to sex and sex work. The report notes, “The co-option of sex workers as intelligence officers suggests that al-Shabaab is a rational actor willing to circumvent its highly public ideological stances when there is significant operational benefit to be gained.”

Many Kenyan women have crossed the borders into Somalia to join al-Shabaab, with most of the existing literature on women in al-Shabaab centering on these women’s testimonies. These stories have involved exploitation, sexual abuse and mistreatment. Kenyan women have frequently described being misled into joining the group; lured in with promises of jobs that turned out to be wholly different, or following their partners into Somalia, before being taken to camps, raped and violated. It is unclear the extent to which Somali women’s experiences in al-Shabaab differ from or overlap with those of Kenyan women. This is something that this research seeks to understand.

4. Female ‘membership’ in al-Shabaab: The numbers

There is little clear understanding about the numbers of women who are members or active participants in al-Shabaab. Male defectors were questioned on whether women actively participate in al-Shabaab. What was notable was the inconsistency in their replies.

Many low level defectors stated that they had never encountered female members of al-Shabaab. Some were insistent about the fact that there was no part for women within the organisation. One said, “There are no women who are members of al-Shabaab. It’s a 100% male organisation.” Another added, “According to me, there are no women. Al-Shabaab food is not cooked by women. The clothes are not even washed by women.” Another explained, “I never heard of it. I was military and was in the bush, so I have never seen such a thing.”

A reason provided for the lack of women in the group, was the group’s position that women should not work. A former militant in Baidoa explained that, “Women are just sympathisers. The group does not allow women to go and fight. That is the rule. They do not allow women to work. Women cannot travel without their husbands. A man cannot travel in a vehicle with a woman, without her husband.” This, he said, would make it difficult for women to work alongside men – “If they arrived at an al-Shabaab roadblock, the person at the roadblock would ask the man for the three full names of his wife. If he could not say her names, it would

be trouble; What kind of man marries a woman they do not know the names of? They would know that they were tricking."

Other men interviewed said they had seen a few women involved with al-Shabaab, "Where I was, there were few, but there are many others in al-Shabaab-controlled parts of the country. I do not know what their roles are. I just saw them."

When asked to estimate the numbers or proportions of women in the group, there was a vast discrepancy in replies. One defector said that he could remember between 5 or 6 women actively involved with the group. Another guessed that, "For every 6 men, there are 2 women." Another said that, "In every district there are a number of women. I can guess – for every 100 men, 25 women." Most surprisingly, in a focus group of defectors in Baidoa, a participant said that 60% of the group are women – and when questioned further, everyone in the group agreed with that. [It is assumed that wives were being included in this estimate.] A defector who had been in the group for 13 years explained, “Different fields have more or less women. In health – where there are 10 men, 3 of them should be women. In other place like intelligence or spying, they have lots of women. Within Mogadishu, if there are 30 people, 15 should be women – like in spying. The number of women also varies according to which part of the country. In the most populated places, women are cooperating more.”

The challenges in ascertainment numbers of female members were aggravated by the fact that unlike men, who would go away to serve on bases, most women supported al-Shabaab from their communities, keeping their support quiet, making it hard to know which women were involved. An interviewee explained, “Women do everything secretly. You may never know they are involved.” The challenges were furthered by the fact that there was little consensus on what it means for women to be members, or on what women’s participation actually entails.

Male former al-Shabaab members were questioned about how they perceived the women contributing to al-Shabaab. Were these women seen as true ‘members’ of al-Shabaab, or were they seen differently? Again, there were vastly differing perceptions put forward. Interestingly, these views varied by geographic location – with interviewees in Baidoa appearing to recognise the roles of women more than those in Mogadishu. Most of the men questioned agreed that women who contributed to the group were real ‘members’. One said, “These women are considered as members, because they are sharing their problems with their men. They are caring. So for this reason they are considered members.” Another said that they considered the women in the group to be their ‘fellow supporters.’ A differing view was that, “Those women who are ‘members’ of al-Shabaab, are those who work in medical area. Other women who cook and other things are just seen as assisting.” In contrast, a defector who had been in the group for 15 years said that, “Al-Shabaab men consider them just to be assisting, not permanent members.”

5. Women’s recruitment into al-Shabaab
The recruitment of women should be understood in the context of the group’s recruitment more generally. Al Shabaab’s recruitment strategies vary according to the geographic area, the individuals involved and the needs of the group at a given time. The group primarily recruits young adults and adolescents – keeping true to its name, which translates as ‘the youth’. In January 2017, Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, estimated that more than half of al-Shabaab’s fighters are children. Recruits are enticed by both ideological/religious factors and economic factors – with al-Shabaab offering funds and livelihoods, where few alternatives are available. Al Shabaab also relies on forced recruitment – including abductions, threats and coercion – and quota recruitment, where they approach a clan, informing them of their need for a certain number of their people.

These general patterns seem to also apply to women. Some women join the group after being radicalised and sold onto the group’s ideology. A male defector noted, “Women are kinder than men, so it is even easier to radicalise women through religion.” Women are used to recruit other women. “To get a woman, al-Shabaab use women. So, women recruit other women for the group.” A key informant explained that women are radicalised by “eloquent female orators” – referring to the compulsory religious lectures that women are forced to attend. Some women are recruited from Madrasas. “They go to Quranic schools and madrassas and they get radicalized. They are told that the rest of Somalis are not Muslim.” A NISA screener explained, “Women join because of ideology. Then they realise it’s not true, and they leave.”

As with men, economic motivations are key to many women joining and supporting al-Shabaab. “When al-Shabaab came, there were promises that men would be paid salaries and that people’s economic situations would improve. This was a key thing that got women to sign up for al-Shabaab.”

Many women ‘join’ al-Shabaab because their husbands are part of the group – leading to wives’ involvement by choice or by force. A defector explained that, “A man has influence over a woman. A man can radicalise all his wives.” Another said that, “Men have decision making powers for their families – over the decision to join and over when to defect.” Some women join al-Shabaab as they have suffered injustice at the hands of others. Others join to gain political power or to seek revenge.

Many women are forcibly recruited into al-Shabaab. This has been commonly seen with children. In al-Shabaab-controlled areas, people are compelled to hand over their children to al-Shabaab, including their girls.

---

22 Al-Shabab, Counter Extremism Project.
When looking at women’s recruitment, one gets at the blurring lines between recruitment for ‘membership’ in the group, and for ‘marriage’ to al-Shabaab militants – speaking to the unclear line between female members and wives, a central theme of this report.

There are many reasons that al-Shabaab recruits women. Interviewees explained that security forces tend to be more relaxed about checking women at checkpoints and intersections, allowing women to pass more easily. An intelligence officer said, “Women have respect in Somalia. You cannot stop them. You cannot search them.” Al-Shabaab takes advantage of this, using women to transport goods and weapons. Women can access places that men are less likely to be able to access. A defector noted that, “A key to men are women. If you want an appointment with the President – if you know his wife, she can arrange that.”

There have been changes in the ways women are utilised by al-Shabaab over the course of the group’s existence. Reasons for these changes are not entirely clear. Earlier in the group’s existence al-Shabaab appeared to have been more hard-line, endorsing the view that women should not be allowed to work at all – including in this, participation in armed group activities. A key informant put forward the view that during the ISIS-war in Syria and Iraq, al-Shabaab might have witnessed how ISIS utilised women and how valuable women were to the group’s success. The informant questioned whether this may have been a factor leading the group to more actively utilise women. Regardless of the reason, it appears that the use of women now forms a part of the group’s recruitment strategy. One article notes that, “Al-Shabaab leader Ibrahim Haji Jama Mee’aad, or “al-Afghani”, issues statements urging women to join the insurgency.”

Women’s participation in al-Shabaab must be seen within the context of Somalia’s patriarchal and clan-based structures. There is a reported hierarchy evident within al-Shabaab; While women fall below men, there is said to be a hierarchy of women derived from who their husband’s clans are.

6. Women’s roles in al-Shabaab

Where women are actively participating in the group – beyond their roles as wives – women play a range of roles. Unlike most men in al-Shabaab, who go away to live and fight with the group, most women serve al-Shabaab from their homes – from cities, towns and villages, in both al-Shabaab-occupied and unoccupied territory. A defector explained that, “These women are part of the group. However, the women stay with their families. When we had

---

jobs for them, they would call them. Then once they finished the jobs, they would go back to their families. Men they stayed in camps.” It seems that this factor, more than anything, shapes the ways in which women carry out their al-Shabaab roles.

For the most part, women are used in non-fighting roles. A defector said, “Some women would also fight – but very few of them.” Many defectors had never heard of women taking on military roles. “There are no physically active women fighting. Women are playing other roles. They are supporting them.” In a contrasting account, a woman in Baidoa recalled, “There was a time when the group was here in Baidoa, when there were even women who carried guns. We saw these women ourselves.”

There have been a number of women involved in suicide bombings – although a study on al-Shabaab’s suicide bombings estimates that women make up less than 5% of bombers. An attack in Mogadishu which took the life of 10 people in April 2012, had a female perpetrator. So too, a NISA screener recalled that, “There were two Diaspora ladies who blew themselves up.” One interviewee mentioned that some woman were experts in explosives – although he was unable provide any more information about this. A defector said, “I have seen a woman arrested by government members holding a grenade. I saw her while I was in the interrogation. I saw her, but I did not speak to her.”

Women have been involved in conducting assassinations. A NISA officer recalled that, “There were three women killers. One killed two cabinet members in 2012. She blew herself up. The other lady killed the Minister of Internal Security in 2012. She was the niece of the late Minister. She killed him in his bedroom.” Another interviewee noted, “A European woman in a hotel in Baidoa two months ago, wanted to kill the Minister. She tried seducing the Minister. She did not actually kill the Minister – she was killed by security forces. She had a suicide belt. She went to run towards the Minister, but she was shot by security.”

Women move and store weapons for al-Shabaab. A defector explained that, “Women bring weapons into the town. Then, when a mission is completed, they take the weapons out again.” Another added, “Women take pistols and grenades from outside of cities into cities.” So too, “When we enter city, they [women] collect the weapons and hold them for us.” Another defector said, “I heard that the women transfer some ammunitions and weapons from al-Shabaab territory to government territory – from outside Mogadishu into Mogadishu.” Women might store weapons in their homes until they are needed, before carrying them to the site of an attack. “Women hold equipment for those who carry out attacks – such as keeping weapons in certain markets”. Women also hide weapons; “When the groups are busy and people can see us, they hide weapons under their clothes.”

Women play a significant part in al-Shabaab’s intelligence network. (One government interviewee even expressed the view that 85% of intelligence-gathering for al-Shabaab is performed by women.) Women are used as spies, as they can move in and out of towns and

27 Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab, Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, United States Military Academy, 2018.
29 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
between government and al-Shabaab territory, less likely to be noticed. A defector explained, "Where men cannot go, women go in to spy... Like, big cities, where government controls. If I want to go and get information, I need to look like the people. Women can easily look like everyone else, so they can easily get information." In particular, women are said to be recruited as spies within the Amniyat, al-Shabaab’s intelligence wing. One defector said that women only communicate with Amniyat leaders and not with any other members of al-Shabaab.

Women are used as informers by al-Shabaab. "Women are good at knowing neighbourhoods and who lives in the community." A defector explained, "If a new person comes to town and al-Shabaab does not know the person, they communicate with women in town, to ask who that man is. Women talk to the man and then pass on the information to al-Shabaab." Another defector said that, “Women do communications. If there is a new woman in town and they do not know her, they will send a woman to talk to her and find out about her: who she is, what is her job, why she came?” An interviewee said that al-Shabaab women are also embedded within government structures, where they act as spies. “Al-Shabaab women are active in all government facilities.” Women are used to send message and information, as they can deliver letters and can fetch information from anywhere.

Women who are based in towns provide the group with real-time information on military movements and checkpoints. “Women do spying for the al-Shabaab military. They tell us how many people are there, the number of soldiers in an area, how they are vigilant, are if they are ready to defend.” Another noted, “Women share information with al-Shabaab leaders – such as, that the army is coming, or that something is happening there.” A defector explained that a network of women living in different part of cities communicate with each other, with women contacting other women when they need support in different places.

Another role that women play for al-Shabaab is fundraising, with women reportedly able to convince people to donate money, goods and jewelry to the group. "Women were fundraising amongst families for funds for the group.” One interviewee, describing the years in which al-Shabaab occupied Baidoa. “There were public gatherings and women talked on the loudspeakers. One day they collected $10,000 worth of gold for al-Shabaab, in just one day.”

Women are also involved in recruitment, especially the recruitment of other women. A defector explained that, “There were women with specialised knowledge of Islam and preaching. They would do door-to-door recruitment.” Another said that, “There were awareness raising campaigns for communities that women were a part of. They would say, ‘Come and join the fight. It is good’.” Interviewees described women giving lectures on al-Shabaab ideology and rules – such as on the importance of women covering their bodies, wearing the full garb that al-Shabaab required.

---

30 Women play a similar role in Somali society more broadly, with women often used for fundraising activities, whether for victims of drought, political candidates during election time, or for the SNA when they are going out to conduct attacks.

An interviewee described how they would create competition between communities. “They would say on the media that this school or this village has collected a certain amount of money, so others should compete. They used the radio – Shabaab radio. They were good at propaganda. They used busses with loudspeakers. They also went door to door, so everyone heard. They would announce, “Today, we had a fight with a murted (a non-believer)”, or “This number of our brothers died.”

Interviewees described how women’s homes were used as hideouts, where women would provide shelter or a hiding place for al-Shabaab members or their families. Women would take food to those arrested on terror-related charges. Women would also help to care for the group’s wounded. “When al-Shabaab men were wounded, some ladies would wash clothes for the wounded and would cook for them.” Another said, “Women were involved in the treatment of the wounded. They would cook and care for the wounded. They were nursing.”

Women play a part in policing for the group. Al-Shabaab has a women’s police group, involved in policing of women, with a woman reportedly running it. One defector recalled, “I knew two of them – they were police members. They used to search women when they arrived in the al-Shabaab courts. They would investigate the women. Some women may come to court and say my husband tortured me – and those women have permission to search their bodies. They write statements and forward the statements to the court. They are the ones who can search bodies.” Women would also search other women in police stations and barracks. Some women were involved in al-Shabaab’s intimidation efforts. An interviewee recalled that a woman had called her cousin threatening, “We know what you do; that you are working against us with the government.”

As with armed groups around the world, women hold domestic roles for the group, although interestingly – and in contrast to other groups – they do not perform these roles directly on al-Shabaab bases. On al-Shabaab bases, “only men cook for the group”, a defector insisted.

Women do prepare food for military operations. “When we go into battle, women prepare food, cakes and water.” Another noted that, “Women made pancakes and some foods that fighters eat. These, women would prepare.” Women also prepare the plastic containers of water that al-Shabaab use in their operations. An interviewee explained how a commander would travel to the cities about once a week to collect the items that women prepared, before returning to the camps with these. A defector who had been in the group for eight years said, “I used to see women during operations, or when we were going walking. Women were gathering and cooking for al-Shabaab and preparing the things we needed. Their number were 30, or around that. I saw them almost six times. Mostly, they were wives of fighters.”

A key informant in Baidoa described how al-Shabaab utilises women in their business endeavours. “Al-Shabaab knows that you can trust a woman more than a man. Women do business on behalf of al-Shabaab – even now [that Baidoa is liberated].” He explained that when al-Shabaab see a good business woman, they invest in her. “They invest in her. They give her about $3,000. Then they come back after two years. They then say to her, give money to someone else.” Even since the time that al-Shabaab departed from Baidoa, they still rely on women. One interviewee described, “A woman in Baidoa is still married to an al-Shabaab man. She sells food. She packs a truck of food to go to Mogadishu. Along the way, there are different instructions. Al-Shabaab men come and take over the truck.” A key informant noted the irony. “Al-Shabaab refused to let women do business then [when they
occupied Baidoa], but now, they use women for business. It’s a distorted view of Sharia.” By furthering their business interests, women contribute to a key survival strategy of al-Shabaab.

Where women live and serve when they are in al-Shabaab
As mentioned above, while women might be contributing to the group, they do this from their homes in towns and villages and not from al-Shabaab camps. In contrast, for men, being part of al-Shabaab normally means moving away from their families.32 “It is impossible to live with the community when you are with al-Shabaab, because you are soldiers, so you can be transferred across the country. You are told to move. It is impossible to live with your family and also with al-Shabaab.”

Women on the other hand are able to remain in their homes, from where they support the group. A defector explained, “They live in the town, and the group contacts them to help if needed. These women are hiding from government. They contact them secretly.” Another said, “Women are not in battalions. They are working alone. Women live in the village, but when al-Shabaab is going to do something, they come together. Another noted that, “People think these women are normal citizen. Women in al-Shabaab live like regular people in the city.”

When asked if any women live on al-Shabaab bases/camps, defectors were adamant that they did not. “No never. They live in the towns.” Another added, “Not even the biggest leaders had their wives there.” Another said, “No, it is not allowed. If you want to go to your wife, you take leave for two months. Even leadership did not live with wives. No women are not allowed to be staying here.”

There was one contradicting view put forward by a defector, “Some women go with men who are in al-Shabaab. Such as governors. When they are transferred, they bring their families.” There also seems to be an exception for women working in health facilities. “Women were living somewhere else – not on the barracks or bases. But when women were working in the clinics or health centres, they live there, with men who are working in medical centre.” As mentioned above, al-Shabaab is a decentralised organisation, with local level leadership determining conditions, possibly accounting for these differences.

For some women, ‘joining’ al-Shabaab meant going to live in al-Shabaab-controlled territory, where they would live amongst the civilian population. In a focus group discussion of wives in Baidoa, the point was made that, “You get women in the group. But they never stay in the place where there is government control. Whether women are members or sympathisers, they will not stay in a government-controlled place.”

7. Al Shabaab wives
A key finding of this study was about the often-blurring lines between female al-Shabaab ‘members’ and al-Shabaab ‘wives’. An interviewee provided his view that, “Every defector has a wife. Sometimes they have two, three or four wives. No al-Shabaab member has just

32 Although many men in the police, governance and support wings of al-Shabaab do remain at home.
one wife. And if he is fighting in al-Shabaab, his wife is a member." Another interviewee said, “Al-Shabaab men, when they get one baby, they divorce a woman. These men marry, divorce, marry, divorce, all the time.”

In contrast to the above assertions, there is evidence that many al-Shabaab men do not have wives. A high risk former member noted that most of the members of the group are young and therefore, are not yet married. A defector said, “80% of them are not married. Only a few are married – and these are not the young ones. These are the ones who married before the start of the group.” It seems that one relevant factor is whether men are in ‘the bush’, or are engaged in controlling towns. A defector said, “When al-Shabaab capture a town, they marry women. They encourage the men in the group to marry women. When they are in the bush, they discourage marriage, because they are not in town, so they will not access basic needs. Older men can continue their marriages. They stop young men marrying when they are in the bush. There is someone in charge of the young men. He will not allow them to marry when they are in the bush, because they will be distracted from fighting. If they are unmarried, they will be undistracted.” A younger man who served in the field said, “I did not have access to find a woman, because where I lived it was the bush. There was no people who lived there.”

For al-Shabaab men who did marry during their time in the group, there were two options for finding wives. Either, “You look for a woman yourself and ask for the group’s support, or al-Shabaab can bring women for you. They can arrange it.”

Most of the defectors interviewed, said they found their wives “the normal way” – by identifying women they liked, getting to know them, before asking their families for permission to marry. Others had marriages arranged by their families. One interviewee recalled how his mother had arranged a marriage for him while he was in the group. He was given some leave days and his mother organised a woman from the village, who he married during his home-leave.

According to the men interviewed, although al-Shabaab did not provide them with women, they did provide other support in getting married – like the money needed for bride price, accommodation and furniture. Women in the group reportedly collected money so that men who wanted to marry could afford this. A defector said, “Al-Shabaab give you money for this. If you cannot afford to marry, they would give you money and then tell you to go out and find a wife.”

**Forced marriage in al-Shabaab**

There were frequent stories told of forced marriage; of women compelled to marry al-Shabaab militants who demanded it, and families having little choice but to accept this. A failure to comply with the wishes of al-Shabaab’s militants can result in punishment or death.33 Sometimes militants are strategic about which women they chose for this. A defector

---

33 “BBC reports tell of women who were beheaded, with their heads sent to their fathers, for refusing to marry Al-Shabaab members (BBC 7 Oct. 2010). The Suna Times states that as many as 13 women and 10 men were executed in southern Somalia between February 2009 and July 2010 for refusing to marry or refusing consent to marry Al-Shabaab fighters (24 Oct. 2010).” Somalia: The situation of women without male support, 17 November 2011, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa.
explained, “Al-Shabaab survey certain women. One of their consideration is women’s poverty levels. They take women who are desperate. They also take women who are more prominent, as they can be spies.”

Al-Shabaab’s menace has the result of making marriages cheaper and easier for their men to arrange. “You cannot refuse your daughter to be married to al-Shabaab. So it is easier for men to marry if they join the group.” A high risk former al-Shabaab explained, “It is cheaper for them to marry under the rule of the group. The group tells parents not to make marriages to the group expensive.” Some men have said that this advantage in terms of finding wives, is one of the reasons they joined the group. A female interviewee in Baidoa recalled that her daughter was forced to marry – al-Shabaab gave her $150 and took her daughter by force.

Interviewees recalled how some women in Baidoa had been married to government soldiers when the town was occupied by al-Shabaab. When al-Shabaab’s men realised their husband were out of the city, they would approach the women saying, “Your husband is a non-believer”. They would then ‘annul’ their marriages, forcing them to marry al-Shabaab men instead. An interviewee in Baidoa recalled how her neighbour’s husband had been away travelling, when she was threatened in this way. They put her neighbour in the car in the middle of the night, to help her escape being ‘remarried’ during his absence. This same interviewee explained how she too was called three times before an al-Shabaab court, where she was told her husband was not a “true Muslim”, that her marriage was being annulled and she was being given to another man. Each of these times, al-Shabaab put her in jail for a few days.

The fear of these forcible marriages motivates people’s actions. An interviewee recalled a man in Kismayo with three daughters. A member of al-Shabaab wanted to marry one of his daughters, yet she refused him, so he beat her up in their shop. After this, the man quickly married off all his daughters to non-al-Shabaab men, to save them from such marriages – including his youngest, who was still underage at the time.

**Al-Shabaab arranging wives**

Al-Shabaab sometimes arranges wives for its members and supporters. A defector explained, “If you need a wife, these ladies are somewhere with an Amir. If you like one, you request to the Amir to give you one of them. Anyone can do this.”

When questioned on where these prospective wives come from, defectors explained, “Normally supporters or members of al-Shabaab, if they have girls, they take the girls to the mayor of the city or to the district officer. He takes their names and he gives out those names to those who need wives, in public places like mosques or madrassas. He said, “If anyone is interested in a wife, we have this number of girls who want to be married.” Al-Shabaab would find out and would bring their men who needed wives.” Another added, “In the area they control, either, parents bought them, or they bought themselves.”

---

Another explained, “It is common. The commander of that area decides which men will get the women. Those ladies go to a place where there is a barrack, so that the commander of the barrack will decide who marries them. Wives of al-Shabaab members normally bring girls from the cities to these areas, and then the commander decides who should be given wives. Some of these would be divorced; some widows. When they get married, they go back to the cities and then they see their husbands on their week leave.”

Some women come voluntarily to marry al-Shabaab men. “Sometimes they come from Mogadishu, sometimes from other regions. They come voluntarily. They come in groups. I saw seven women who came. They said, “We need mujahideen”. Then the group organised for them husbands.” Another said, “I saw this once on Eid. There were nine girls. I don’t know where they came from. They came to us in Awdiinle in Lower Shabelle. The girls came together and asked for husbands. The Amir divided up the girls to fighters on Eid. They had the wedding on Eid.”

It is reportedly often women who come from afar who are available for these marriages. “They immigrate foreigners from Kenya. They are kept somewhere. ... All women in this were Kenyan. Kenyan women are treated in a high-level way. There were accommodated somewhere, then they studied, before they were married.” This interviewee described having seen this place while travelling. “It’s near a base – 25 kilometres away…. There were about 25 women there, all Kenyan. They used to come and then leave to go to different areas. This was in Hiiraan, near Middle Shaballe.” Another said that, “Normally those ladies come from far places like Somaliland, Hargeisa.”

When asked why it was normally women from afar used in these arranged marriages, defectors explained, “Women who came from far, they are alien. They don’t know people in the area. Local women, they can find husbands in a normal way, so there is no need to do allocations. Aliens don’t know the language and the environment, so it helps for them to have an arranged marriage.” Another said that, “Most of the women were foreigners. Because they are foreigner, they do not know about the country. So, the person who invited them is the one who is looking for a husband for them.” Al-Shabaab men were encouraged to bring more women to the group, “Al-Shabaab members who came from far are encouraged [to bring women]. They would contact ladies in Hargeisa, asking if they are married, saying they have someone who they can marry here; and can they come?”

**Wife inheritance**

Al-Shabaab has distorted the traditional practice of wife inheritance, in terms of which a widow can be married to her husband’s male relative. According to the group, if an al-Shabaab man is killed, any man in the group can inherit his wife. A defector explained, “According to al-Shabaab, any al-Shabaab man can inherit a wife of an al-Shabaab man – as they are like brothers.” A defector who had been in the group for 15 years explained: “If they marry a woman by a fighter, if he dies, no civilian can marry her. She is supposed to marry another member of al-Shabaab. This is a rule of al-Shabaab.” Neither the woman, nor her family, can refuse this. A key informant said, “They are married to two or three men in a row. They think she is property. She has no say in this.” This interviewee described one woman who fled the group, after being married to three men, having 10 children between them. “She finally said, I do not want to be married anymore.”

Interestingly, in a further distortion of this practice, wives are also ‘inherited’ when their husbands defect from the group. A defector explained, “If al-Shabaab selects a wife for you,
when you leave from them, they will take away that lady and give her to another man – even if he had children. One of my wives, when I defected, they took her back.” Another man explained that when he defected his wife was given to another man. She did not want to be remarried, so she ran away from al-Shabaab territory. “She wants to continue to be my wife.”

Difference between female members and wives
A key challenge in this research, was distinguishing female ‘members’, from al-Shabaab ‘wives’. It is clear that these two categories frequently overlap. When defectors were asked whether women who supported the group tended to be married to al-Shabaab men, the dominant reply was that they often were. “You cannot support someone and not marry him,” one said. Another said “Many of the female members were al-Shabaab wives also. They were scattered. Whoever is around can support. Others can be reached by phone.”

While it can probably be said that most female members are married to al-Shabaab men, it does not seem to be the case that most wives contribute to the group. When defectors were asked if their wives contributed in any way, the following were their answers: “No. Wives stay at home. They have nothing to do with group activities.” Another said, “Only a few wives participated in the group. Some women never knew their husbands were part of group. They were keeping it secret. Later, if she finds out, she might leave.”

One explained, “It depends on the husband. Some husbands like their wives to serve the group. Others do not like it.” This man explained that he did not want his wife to serve the group, as he didn’t want other members of al-Shabaab to see or meet her. A defector who had been in the group for seven years said of his wives that, “They did not support the group, but they supported me personally. They normally follow my orders – they did what I told them to do. If I told them to behave well, they behaved. If I tell them to move from one area to another, they do. They always follow my orders.”

Others were emphatic about the fact that wives did nothing for the group. “I have never seen a role they play other than caring for children and household work.” Another said, “They stay in their homes and if the husband needs to do something maybe she can assist him, but never anything for the group. … She takes care of the children. She is cooking for him. This is just considered as being a wife – not as helping the group. They are considered as wives and normal people, not as members.”

The wives interviewed for this study were adamant that they did not support the group at all – although this might have had to do with the fact that the women interviewed were wives of defectors, being asked about participation in unlawful activities. Some said that they had not known their husbands were involved with al-Shabaab for much of the time they served the group. One recalled that her husband had told her he was going out to find work. “He used to say I’m a farmer going away to work in that area.” When she found out he was in al-Shabaab, she asked him to leave the group. Another woman explained that her husband pretended he was going for a second wife in another village. “They would trick us. At day time they would stay at home. In the night, they would help the group.”
8. Abduction and sexual violence

Abductions
While media and other written reports about al-Shabaab make much of women being abducted by the group, most defectors interviewed for this study said that they had never heard of al-Shabaab abductions.

A few had heard of this – but generally anecdotally, having little specific information about this. One said, “There is a city called Baiire in Lower Shabelle. Al-Shabaab attacked that city. There was a government barrack there. When they overran the city, I heard that all females belonging to military – the wives and relatives of government officials – were taken by al-Shabaab. They were held somewhere for about seven or nine months. Then they were distributed to the group as wives.” This interviewee believed this incident happened some time in 2018.

Female government soldiers are also sometimes taken. “When they attack government bases, they may capture female soldiers. Sometimes these women are asked to denounce government activities. I do not know what happens to such women. As I am soldier, I do not have information about that.” Women from AMISOM have also been targeted. “When they attack somewhere they collect women from that area and then they give them to men. This only happened once that I know of. It was AMISOM forces. I saw one AMISOM woman soldier captured and given to a man as a wife.”

Sexual violence
Interestingly while documentation about Kenyan women involved with al-Shabaab centres largely on sexual violence, this almost never came up in the interviews in Somalia. It is not clear whether this is because there is less sexual violence against Somali women, or rather, whether subjects just did not discuss this ( – even when questioned directly). The fact that this research relied primarily on information provided by male defectors – rather than women themselves – could be a key reason for this.

For the most, the defectors interviewed for this study said they had never heard of al-Shabaab men sexually abusing women. When questioned about sexual violence, a few mentioned the stories of abduction described in the section above. No one said anything about other incidents of rape. (Note that forced marriages are a form of sexual violence, and these were said to be common).

One more unusual claim provided by a key informant in Baidoa, (who was not former al-Shabaab) – and which has not been confirmed elsewhere – centres on the part that HIV plays

---

35 To give a sense of existing research, reports from Kenyan women, collated by other researchers, includes the following types of claims: "They made me their sex slave, anyone could come and sleep with me and none of them wore condoms. They beat me and cut my body, by the time I left, I was covered in wounds.” Escape from al-Shabab: ‘I was turned into a sex slave’, Africa, DW, 2018. Another testimony says, “We were verbally and physically abused. I did not get married to any of the group’s members but they would use us for sexual purposes. We were given contraception so that we did not conceive.” Inside the Ranks of Women Fighters, Somalia: Al-Shabaab, allAfrica.com, 31 January 2018.
in forced marriages and on how the spread of HIV is instrumentalised by al-Shabaab, in order to find men willing to act as suicide bombers. The interviewee reported having heard that an al-Shabaab man infected with HIV will find a woman, marry her and have sexual relations with her. He remains with her for just a few days before departing to carry out a suicide bombing. She is left widowed and infected with HIV. She then goes on to marry another al-Shabaab man and passes HIV on to him. The interviewee explained, “HIV positive men are the ones who give themselves up as suicide bombers. HIV is an effective way to get someone to give up on life – so he is more likely to agree to be a suicide bomber…. They say to HIV men, “In this world you are sick. In paradise you will not be sick.” This is used as a tactic to spread HIV.” This assertion has not been repeated elsewhere, leaving question as to its accuracy. Attempts will be made to verify this story in the next phases of this research.

9. Women’s lives when husband and sons are in al-Shabaab

Interviews with female family members of defectors reveal that women have a difficult time when their husbands and sons are away with the group. A woman explained, “Life was harder when they were in al-Shabaab. There was not enough food to eat. … Most of the time our husbands were on mission and were not around. They could not provide for the family.”

Women emphasised their economic woes. “When he first joined I felt worried because he used to be a man that worked for us. He used to be a carpenter.” Another said, “Life was difficult. My son used to work for me – he made money in the shop. When he joined the group, we lost this. We did not have these earnings.” Instead, she had to go out and wash clothes for other families. She recalled struggling financially – “I didn’t even have a mattress.”

Women – particularly the mothers interviewed – described how they used to worry. “When he was in al-Shabaab, I felt worried. Sometimes I did not take food.” Another added, “My heart was not feeling well.” A mother explained, “We realised that one day he will be killed. We were afraid of him being killed. Then we would not even see his dead body. He will be thrown outside in the bush.” A mother described the agony of her son disappearing to join the group following a disagreement he had with her. “Some people were travelling and spotted him in al-Shabaab-controlled area. They reported this to our family. We did not go to look for him. We afraid to look for him. We kept quiet until he came to Serendi.”

“I missed him. I cried and cried”, another mother said. She used to visit al-Shabaab camps to try see her son, but the group refused to let her see him – each time, sending her away. She did not see her son for the full six years he was in group, only seeing him again when he arrived at the Serendi rehabilitation centre in Mogadishu. She explained, “If you tried to search for him, al-Shabaab will cut you and will beat you.” She said, “I used to go everywhere where al-Shabaab was. I used to ask for him. We thought he had died because he was gone for five years.” Now, she says happily. “He looks perfect. He is strong. He was weak when he was there.”

Levels of stigma for being related to al-Shabaab members vary depending on where women live; whether in an al-Shabaab-controlled area, or a government-held area. In some places, where there is more al-Shabaab support, having a family member in al-Shabaab, can give women status. In other places, wives are stigmatised when people know their husbands are with the group. One interviewee described how such women might be stuck in their homes,
unable to go out in their communities. She described one such woman in Baidoa who died giving birth, because she could not go out for help. In other areas, there appears to be less stigma levelled against al-Shabaab wives.

10. Family contact

The amount that women get to see their al-Shabaab husbands or sons varies significantly.

Some men living in al-Shabaab territory – such as men from the police and governance wings of the group – serve the group from home, although interviews suggested this is not the norm. For example, when al-Shabaab occupied Baidoa, members served the group in the town, while living at home with their wives, making short incursions away when necessary. When the government took over Baidoa, those men moved away with al-Shabaab. From that time on, their wives got to see them much less – and some Baidoa wives did not see their husbands again until they defected. “When the government took over, none of the al-Shabaab sympathisers could stay, because of government intelligence. So everyone who was part of the group left.” Some of the Baidoa women interviewed claimed to have not known that their husbands were members of al-Shabaab during the time they served from home. It was only when the government came and their husbands left with the group, that they learned their men were part of al-Shabaab.

Most al-Shabaab men leave their homes to live and fight with the group. The amount that they visit home seems to depend on their roles, ranks and positions – such as whether they were in the military, police or governance wings of the group – as well as on where they were stationed and where their families lived. The interviews gave a sense of some of these differences.

Where al-Shabaab camps were nearby and accessible, some women would go and visit their husbands regularly. One wife interviewed explained that her husband had been with the group for four years, during which time he moved around to different places. She used to visit him wherever he was, while the rest of the time they kept contact by phone. Another wife lived 100 kilometres from the place where her husband served. Every three months she would come to him and stay a week or two. During these times, he would take leave and would meet her in the towns nearby. Another wife saw her husband less. “I saw him very few times – maybe once a year.” When she heard that he was at the camp, she and her husband’s brother would go and look for him. “Another man would call the phone and share that information, saying “We have seen your brother or husband here.”” She recalled the disappointment of sometimes travelling to the camp, to find that he was no longer there.

Other men go to visit their families. Home-leave policies appear to differ dramatically between locations and over time, and are controlled by local commanders. Some recruits never get leave. Some are entitled to leave after a certain amount of time with the group. Some are entitled to leave only if they are married. Some are entitled to leave only if they are trusted. One defector explained, “Normally when a man has a family, he gets monthly leave. You only get monthly leave when you work for six months. Each six months you get one month of leave.” One defector recalled that his wife lived in a different area from where he served. He visited her whenever he got leave, seeing her about three times a year. Another defector, only saw his wife three times during the two years he was in the group, with each visit lasting for a month. Another, in al-Shabaab for seven years, explained, “I used to have leave every eight months for one month.” Another said, “It depends on the situation; sometimes twice a
year, sometimes four times a year, sometimes you do not get to see her. It depends on operations and on things you are doing.”

Women described their frustrations. “One time, I was in maternity and he was visiting, but al-Shabaab forced him to leave, despite the fact that I was having a baby.”

Phone use
Phones played an important role, both in allowing men to keep in touch with their families, as well as in providing them a way to send money home. Smart phones were banned by al-Shabaab, but most members had access to basic mobile phones.

The amount that men were able to use their phones varied. Some al-Shabaab members kept their phones at all times and could use them whenever they pleased. Others were only allowed access to their phones at particular times – like on Thursdays and Fridays. “We normally had access to our phone two days per week. We had two hours to speak on the phone.” Some were only given their phones once a month, while others, “after 15 days, on a Friday.” Another said, “Our phones were kept somewhere else. They were distributed to us at certain times, switched on, and we could phone our family and relatives.”

One defector who had been a fighter explained, “It’s depending on the field you work in. People who stay in cities – like police – have a chance to contact their wife. For those who are military it is hard, because there are often no networks.”

An interviewee described some level of paranoia by al-Shabaab about phone use. Al-Shabaab reportedly did not allow phone calls within the camp, because they were afraid this would allow drones to attack. As such, they would take the members 30 kilometres away from camp, allow them to phone home, before transporting them back. Another explained, “You can talk on the phone, but it depends on where you are. If you are where the drones are targeted, all phones are collected, so there is no phone access. If you are in a normal place, you can call your wife. You can keep your phone and can talk any time.”

Some al-Shabaab members made no contact with their families at all. Family members of one defector explained that the first contact they had had with their son following his recruitment, was when he arrived at the Serendi rehabilitation centre.

Salary payments
Al-Shabaab provided many of its members with money, which they sent back to their families. The amounts they were paid differed. Amounts depended on people’s roles in the group, with high-value roles (such as Amniyat, bomb makers and logisticians), receiving higher amounts than al-Shabaab military and police.

One defector reported that he earned $30 USD per month from the group. He used to send this to his wife through a mobile phone payment. Another said that the amounts he was paid varied, “Sometimes it was $30 per month, sometimes $70 per month. But every month they gave some money.” Another reported receiving around $100 per month, “One time, $70 for my wife, $40 for my mother. Each time was a little different.” A defector explained that the amount paid to married and unmarried men differed. “They only give us $10 per month. But
married men got 30 USD." Salaries were not consistently paid, and there is evidence that many al-Shabaab members supplemented their income by extorting the population.  

Some men interviewed said that they were not paid anything by the group, so they had nothing to send their families. Interestingly, it was men in Baidoa who normally reported not being paid, in contrast to most of the men interviewed in Mogadishu.

When asked whether al-Shabaab provided support to families of men who had been killed, high risk former al-Shabaab men in a discussion group said, “No. Only relatives can help.”

11. Female defectors

This section looks at what happens to women when they leave the group. The difficult starting point here is; What does it actually mean for women to “leave the group”? Given that most women involved in al-Shabaab are not fighters and are not actually away from home, what does it mean for women to ‘leave’ or ‘defect’?

The second challenging question is; Who can ‘defect’? Is it only women participating militarily? Is it women assisting the group in other ways? What about wives who play small roles for the group as their husbands are members? How about when an al-Shabaab wife with no involvement in the group moves away from her husband and from al-Shabaab territory?

There are no clear answers to these questions. However, these questions hold much importance for the question of how to assist women associated with the group. A NISA officer raised the related problem of who must present themselves for screening at NISA, “Which categories of women must “defect”? If you are a wife do you defect? If you are a woman merely living in al-Shabaab territory? If you are a family member?”

Putting aside these questions for now, the descriptions in the sections below consider these different groupings of women together. When questioned about women ‘leaving’ the group, it became clear that interviewees were mixing the different categories of women. This research was not able to elaborate different pathways and processes for different women’s groupings. In the testimonies below, it was apparent that when some women ‘left’ al-Shabaab, it meant they stopped actively supporting the group, some ‘left’ meaning they left al-Shabaab territory, while some ‘left’ meaning they left their al-Shabaab husbands. Further research is required to disentangle these differences.

Why do women leave al-Shabaab?

Interviewees provided a host of reasons for women ‘leaving’ the group. Many centred on women’s experiences not measuring up to their expectations. A NISA screener explained that, “Women join because of ideology. Then they realise it’s not true, and they leave.” Other women were said to have become involved in the group because of their husbands, before coming to realise their husband’s ideologies were wrong.

---

Women reportedly left because of the hard conditions. “Living conditions under al-Shabaab territory are tough,” someone explained. “Most women were born and raised in the city. When they joined, they left the city to go to al-Shabaab. But they could not handle the situation.” Another said, “Al-Shabaab wives abandoned their husbands after they saw the difficult life in al-Shabaab. She cannot move along with the offensive because of her children. So the young children and wives move back, because they cannot follow the harsh conditions.”

Some women ‘left’ as their husbands were not meeting their responsibilities towards them, and they found it difficult to provide for their children without support. Some left as their families were killed by al-Shabaab. Some left because of pressure from their families to leave. Some wives left to avoid wife inheritance – or being ‘inherited’ to marry another militant after their own husbands were killed or defected. Some left after clashes with government. “Sometimes there was conflict or they could not tolerate the things the group was doing. Or they did not feel comfortable living there.”

The decision to leave al-Shabaab is not an easy one, given the uncertainty, risk and challenges involved in leaving and relocating. Some women also struggle with this choice from a religious and ideological perspective. An interviewee noted, “Women are asking sheiks what will happen if she abandons an al-Shabaab husband.”

**What happens to women once they leave the group?**

Women’s pathways out of al-Shabaab are fluid and inconsistent, not following the more organised defection process that has been put in place for men. At the time of writing, there were no defection and rehabilitation facilities and programmes for women.

For some women, stopping being involved with al-Shabaab, simply means stopping carrying out tasks in support of the group – particularly where women supported al-Shabaab secretly from their homes. A male defector who had been in the group for 15 years explained: “If they leave, they just become normal people. They live where they used to live. No one knows which women have been involved. When they leave no one realised they were al-Shabaab or considered them al-Shabaab, so they have no danger. They were always hidden in their work.” Another defector in Baidoa explained, “Women never left Baidoa. Some became soldiers. Some stayed at home but just stopped supporting al-Shabaab, because the government would find out about them.”

---

39 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
Other women have to take more practical steps to leave – by leaving their husbands, leaving al-Shabaab territory, or moving from one place to another. The pathways for these women differ greatly, depending on where in the country they move to. In some places, women can simple arrive and integrate into the community. In a big city like Mogadishu, women can arrive and settle and this would hardly be noticed by others. “Because Mogadishu is so big, people can hide. It is hard to say where people are from. Women go to IDP [internally displaced person] camps or to their relatives. It is hard in Mogadishu to know who is in and out of the city. So it’s hard to know what has happened to female defectors.”

Smaller towns like Baidoa allow less anonymity, so people tend to notice who is newly arrived. As a result, more of a formalised system has been put in place to deal with women. An IOM scoping study reported that, “Baidoa was the only place where a process seemed to be in place for female defectors. They seemed to follow the same procedure as men. Female defectors would reach out to either their relatives or an elder to negotiate their return on their behalf. The female defector is then taken to the police station and then CID and then NISA screening. Once she is interviewed by NISA she is released into the custody of a guarantor as there is nowhere to refer them.” Once released to their families, NISA monitors these women, requiring that they report to them at regular intervals.

Kismayo has taken an altogether different approach to women involved with al-Shabaab. In 2015, a decision was taken by the local government to expel all al-Shabaab wives from the city. Al-Shabaab men would reportedly come to town to conduct missions or to see their families, and would be harboured, assisted and hidden by their wives. To prevent this, a decision was made to expel these women. A NISA screener explained that, “They identified such women and said that they had 24 hours to leave the city. Most of the women went to Gill and Buulo Hawo to stay with their husbands.”

Some women leaving al-Shabaab take other paths. Some marry government soldiers. An interviewee explained, “It’s a river. Al-Shabaab is one side of the bank. The government is on the other side. You cannot stay in the water. If you leave the one side of the bank, you have to cross to the other side.” The point was made that, “When women divorce al-Shabaab men, in order to be safe, they have to marry for safety.”

42 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
Some women leave al-Shabaab in groups – as part of group deals. Some leave as part of clan defections. There is little clarity on what happens to these women. Clans sometimes play a part in securing women’s release from NISA or other security forces. A NISA officer recalled a case in which, “a lady was arrested in Somaliland – the wife of late Amir. She had a lot of information on al-Shabaab. Her clan came and discussed it with government and she was released.”

**NISA’s screening of women**

NISA receives male defectors, interviews and collects intelligence about them, and based on this, screens defectors as being either ‘high risk’ or ‘low risk’ – a determination which establishes whether they are eligible for amnesty and rehabilitation, or rather, whether they are referred to the military court system for prosecution.

The screening of women is more inconsistent, with less of a clear established pathway. A number of NISA screeners were interviewed for this study and a group discussion was held at a screener’s training workshop, to ascertain how many women pass before NISA and how they are treated and screened.

While some women do pass through NISA, many women reintegrate without seeing them. NISA officers explained that for the most part women are not screened, but rather are just sent back to their communities. A NISA interviewee explained, “They are not screened because people do not think that women pose a threat.” Another reason given for not screening women is that NISA have no place to house women while conduct screening. NISA’s arrangements for women varied by geographic location, with some places having more formalised arrangements for women than others.

It is clear that stereotypes about women affect the approach of screening officers. At a screener’s workshop, a screener explained that, “Most of the women are taken as being ‘victims’. We don’t take them as criminals.” Another said, “Instead of targeting women, we target those who are making them do this job.” Another agreed that, “The women were misled by al-Shabaab.” A screener said, “What do you do with a woman with children. You have no evidence that she committed a crime, and children did not commit a crime. So we hand her to her family.”

---

43 Clan loyalties are very important in pledging allegiance to/against the group. As an example, in the case of Mukhtar Robow, his supporters in the Leysan (one of the most powerful Rahanweyn sub-clans) sub-clan left en masse when he defected.
44 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
45 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
46 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
47 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
48 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
To date, where women are screened, they are screened using the same screening tool used for men. This research identified the need for a tailored screening tool for women – given the differing ways in which women and men participate in al-Shabaab. A few tricky issues would need to be ironed out in creating such a tool. NISA officers pointed to the confusion between wives and female members as the key factor that makes screening women challenging. “What is the difference between wives and members? Screening won’t work for wives. This is why there should be a centre for all women associated with al-Shabaab.” In a workshop, a NISA officer said that they had not seen “high risk” women, but that they had had one “high level” woman – a woman married to Amir. “High level” is not a categorisation in the screening tool. All of this points to the need for a tool to disentangle this, so that NISA officers use a consistent approach in their dealings with women. Thought should be given as to whether and how the risk categories should be applied to women. So too, screeners require training on how to deal with and screen women.

Most NISA screeners are men, although there are a few women involved in screening. It was difficult to ascertain the number of female screeners – as no interviewees were clear on this. One NISA interviewee said that there are one or two female screeners in Mogadishu, while in Baidoa there were said to be three female screeners. This research identified the need for more female screeners to screen women.

It was also difficult to get a sense of the number of women who have passed through NISA for screening. There are no accessible records on this. Anecdotal information suggests that the numbers vary greatly by geographic location. For example in Shabelle, the NISA screener had never come across a female defector before. In contrast in Baidoa, NISA screeners recalled that in 2016 they had their first female defectors – a group of 10 females. Since then, there have been other groups of women – including 16 women during the month in which this research was conducted. A screener in Hudur said that they had recently received 80 female defectors, between the ages of 20-50 years old.

In Hudur, once screened, these women are sent back to their families, as NISA have no facilities for female defectors. These women are told to present themselves at NISA twice a week. So too, in Baidoa, newly arrived women would be interviewed by NISA, before being released into the custody of a guarantor. The Baidoa officer explained, “When women are screened, low risk women are sent to their family. Twice a week the women report to NISA. If they need to, NISA can also call them. There has been no trouble so far.” On high risk

---

49 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
50 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
51 Baidoa NISA screeners interview, 15 April 2019.
women he said, “High risk women are sent to the government, but we do not know what happens to them then. In Baidoa, we have never had a high risk woman before.”

The Baidoa screeners were confident that all relevant women in the town made their way to them for screening. A screener explained, “Baidoa is small. Everyone knows each other. If there is a new person who comes, they will see. So people in the town need to go and register as defector and then they are monitored.” He added, “If a defector attempted to come back without going to see NISA, this person would be reported sooner or later through neighbour watch programs and then they would get a visit from NISA.”

What rehabilitation facilities exist for women?
The lack of facilities to assist women, is a clear gap in the National Defector’s Programme. At the time of writing, there were no operational rehabilitation facilities for women, although IOM was in the early stages of planning and implementing a women’s programme.

Between 2015/6, IOM ran a programme for women. That programme was closed, reportedly due to, “…security concerns; community rejection of the facility due to rumours that it housed high risk female al Shabaab agents’ and lack of funding.” At the time of this research, IOM were in the early stages of implementation of a community-based rehabilitation and reintegration programme for “women associated with armed forces and groups”. The target beneficiaries of this programme include women who were forced into al-Shabaab, through marriage, slavery or kidnapping, and who followed their husbands into the group. Notably, this programme will not include female fighters or active participants in the group. Actively participating women are excluded as they are considered higher risk – meaning they would need to be screened by NISA – while this project is community based, targeting low risk women. As such, even when this programme begins, there will remain a programming gap for actively participating women. The programme is planned to have 150 beneficiaries – 50 in Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayo respectively.  

__________________________

52 Baidoa NISA screeners interview, 15 April 2019.
53 NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.
56 Selection will be done through a community selection process, with a selection panel consisting of community elders, heads of villages and civil society. Selection will be based on need – but former involvement with al-Shabaab will be required. There will be four criteria for selection: 1. The woman joined al-Shabaab through force, 2. The woman found herself in al-Shabaab territory, 3. She followed her husband into al-Shabaab, 4. Women were radicalised and signed up themselves.
There are a few, very limited, local initiatives that assist women associated with al-Shabaab. In Baidoa, a civil society organisation works with women who have returned from al-Shabaab. A representative explained that they provide them with support, including money and kits of basic necessities. They also conduct mediation between families, where needed to reconcile families estranged due to participation in al-Shabaab. A representative explained that while others in the population might receive donations and aid from government, “Women in this position do not want their presence to be known, so they always miss out on these.” In the same vein, an IOM study noted that, “… NGOs are less likely to offer such programs or even GBV support if they know the person has defected from al-Shabaab.”

Women from a civil society network in Mogadishu reported that they do not provide material support to women returning from al-Shabaab, but they do provide them with individual counselling. They explained that these women often move around between districts in Mogadishu. The network tracks them, in order that their representatives can approach them to offer counselling. “Most al-Shabaab women do not know each other, and do not wish to be known by others.”

Challenges women face post defection
Interviewees described some of the challenges that women face when ‘leaving’ al-Shabaab. Many of these problems are practical. Some women flee alone or with their children and struggle to find housing and to secure livelihoods. A key informant explained, “They had some access to livelihoods while they were in the group, but once they leave, they no longer have this.” Some women need psychosocial support, after suffering traumatic experiences while with the group. Some require family mediation.

There were differences of opinion about the levels of stigma women face after leaving al-Shabaab. Some stated that these women are badly stigmatised. “People say she is al-Shabaab, so they stay away from her.” Another said, “These women are restricted in their communities. They keep to themselves.” An interviewee in Baidoa spoke about a particular nurse/midwife who had been married to an al-Shabaab man. “When al-Shabaab left the town, people stopped going to her for her nursing services.”

Felbab-Brown writes that women who had been married to al-Shabaab fighters are seen by their families and communities as disgraced, and unable to be married off again. Sometimes women are expelled from their communities for this. Felbab-Brown notes that former al-Shabaab women from minority clans and displaced women face the highest risk of

[^58]: Discussion with women’s organisation / civil society organisations, Mogadishu, 17 April 2019.
marginalisation.” She explains that there have been several instances of community retaliation against al Shabaab wives – such as in Kismayo and Baidoa, where local authorities and some community members wanted to expel them from these areas, together with their children.

Other interviewees were of the opinion that these women would be welcomed back by their communities. Some expressed the view that it was the attitudes of the women themselves that leads to their marginalisation and to them being cut off from their communities. An interviewee explained, “The former al-Shabaab women stick to themselves – they are loners.”

The way in which former al-Shabaab women are received, depends also on the place and on a given community’s relationship with al-Shabaab. For example in a community like Kismayo, which was under al-Shabaab for a long time, many community members are sympathetic to the group, meaning that those leaving its ranks have less problems being accepted.

Some said that women would not experience problems when ‘leaving’ al-Shabaab, as most people would not actually realise they had been involved with the group – because women served from home and normally in secret. “Most of the time women have a veil, so you do not know who is and who is not involved.” A defector said, “When al-Shabaab ruled Baidoa, it was compulsory to wear full face veils. So. women who were involved, or who were teaching for al-Shabaab, you would never know who they were.”

Even for those women who had to relocate, defectors believed they would have an easier time than men. A former al-Shabaab man said, “There are many women who left the group. There are many – I know them. When they leave, they come to cities and live normally. They have no problems. You won’t know them. They may still be supporting al-Shabaab. Maybe they are pretending to have defected, but they are still working.” Another defector confirmed, “They are welcomed back. Many in community don’t realise they are members.”

Some women who leave al-Shabaab face danger from the group. A defector in Mogadishu told the story of a woman he knew who worked with Amniyat. Once she left al-Shabaab, she moved to Mogadishu. While there, al-Shabaab contacted her, demanding she return, yet she refused. Sometime later, she needed something from al-Shabaab territory. When she travelled there, al-Shabaab captured and arrested her. The defector who told this story was not sure what happened to her after that.

12. What is the best way to assist these women?

Is there a need to assist women?
The first question to be asked is; do women associated with al-Shabaab require assistance or rehabilitation? To this question, interviewees gave vastly differing responses. (Again, in

these answers below, the various types of associated women appeared to be mixed together).

For the most part, male defectors said there was little need for a centre or facility to assist women. One defector said, “I do not think there is a need for a centre for women. Their number is small – you will see maybe one year, one defector. Women do not have the pressures that men do. Men leave al-Shabaab and must live in government areas. For women, it is easier to slip back into community, because they do not feel pressure like us.” Another defector said, “No, it is not possible. They are not physically involved as combatants. They are not carrying weapons. So there is no way that you can open up rehabilitation for them. They did not carry out any crimes. All of those ladies are wives of al-Shabaab members. No one knows them – if they are members or not. No one knew if they were a member or just a wife.” In a focus group discussion of high risk men in Baidoa, there was agreement on the fact that, “It is good to rather strengthen the efforts on men’s side.”

In contrast, wives of former al-Shabaab men were of the opinion that women must be assisted. “Yes, we need a centre. To help us establish livelihood skills. Because us and our husbands are not working.” These women seem to focus on women’s need for material support – rather than for any type of rehabilitation. “Women join al-Shabaab because they have no education, no job opportunities, no facilities. So you must help them by giving them these things.” Another interviewee added that, “Their children need milk, rent, food, education. They need money.” Some male defectors agreed with this point. A high risk man in Baidoa said that instead of rehabilitating women or wives, “Just support women with financial support and education. Women have children, and their husbands have been killed. They do not have any support.”

The point was repeatedly made that if women are assisted, more women would leave the group. An al-Shabaab wife in Baidoa said, “There are lots of women we know who want to leave al-Shabaab and come home. They are in touch with us to ask what is the life here like. If there was assistance, they would come. These are wives of al-Shabaab who have been neglected there like us. For women who were involved in fights – it will take a lot to get them to defect.” Another said, “We know women we left behind who are in desperate conditions. If we speak out, they will hear and come.” So too, a male defector said. “There are many women who want to escape and run away from al-Shabaab, but they do not know where to run to.” Another defector noted, “If there was a female rehabilitation centres, and women heard it, they may come. It all depends on them getting the information.”

NISA officers seemed to agree with this point, “Women want to leave al-Shabaab, but there are risks. They need shelter and protection. … They cannot leave unless they know that they will find these things.” He added, “If female defectors get rehabilitation, we expect more to come.” Another NISA officer said, “They are scared. They do not know about the rehabilitation programme. Now, women will be willing to take any programme.”

Importantly, the point was also made that providing assistance to women, would lead to more men defecting. A defector said, “If they have a centre for women, this will lead to more defection of men. Because if a woman leaves the group and is in a centre, then she will force you to come in and be part of it. Otherwise there will be a family break. She has the children. Otherwise they might request a divorce.” Another added that, “An al-Shabaab man will not defect if there is nothing for his wife and family.”
What is the best way to assist women?
The difficult question then, is how best should these women be assisted? The first question to ask is; which women should be provided with assistance? This report has described the various groupings of women involved with al-Shabaab including; women actively supporting the group (militarily and otherwise), wives, abductees and other women from al-Shabaab territory. Who of them should be provided with assistance? Do needs differ between the different groups of women?

A relevant factor here, will be the rationale for programming. If programming has a security rationale – as the male defector’s programme has – aimed at rehabilitating those actively supporting the group with the goal of degrading the group, then programming should focus on women who are actively involved with al-Shabaab, as well as on women ideologically committed to the group’s ideals who are involved in furthering the group’s goals.

If however, programming has a more humanitarian purpose, aimed at assisting those in need, then wives, abductees and women escaped from al-Shabaab territory should be included. The upcoming IOM programme – which excludes actively participating women – is more geared in this direction. If, as some interviewees said, helping wives leave, might encourage husbands to defect, as well as encouraging the defection of more actively participating women, then such programming could achieve both security and humanitarian ends.

This problem is not unique to Somalia. Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes around the world, have struggled with disentangling female combatants and armed group wives. In more recent years, the trend has moved towards not trying to classify or separate them, but rather, to assist such women together, as “women associated with armed forces/groups”. One downside to this approach is that this significantly enlarges the beneficiary group, necessitating vastly scaled up programming.

The next question then, is how best to assist women? Is the preferable model to have a residential centre, as male defectors have, or is there a better approach for women?

---

61 An IOM scoping study got quite different answers to this question, in the different cities in which they carried out their research. “It was very clear from Baidoa that there was a need for a centre, similar to what they had for the men, which would be used to house female defectors and their children. In Kismayo, it was also agreed that there was a need for a centre, but there were split views as to whether this centre should be a day centre, or whether it should house the defectors. In Mogadishu, there were views expressed that a centre should be opened but it should not just be limited to female defectors and it should also be open to other vulnerable women. At times, it seemed that those interviewed were at times mixing up transition centres and safe houses.” Rapid Assessment of the needs of Female Defectors, Mission Report, International Organisation for Migration, 2018.
Many interviewees were of the opinion that residential centres might not be the best method for women. For one thing, this might expose women to stigma. A key informant said, “I’m not sure that a women’s centre is the best way forward. Women who were in al-Shabaab often prefer that fact to remain hidden. Being hidden prevents stigma.” Echoing this another key informant said, “Women should not be invisible, but they should be hidden.” Some raised protection concerns about keeping women in a centre, with questions raised about who the guards should be. Others questioned the appropriateness of having women segregated from their families whilst being kept in centres. A defector said, “Women’s parents will not let women leave their homes to go to the centre.”

One challenge in having a residential facility for women, is thinking through what to do with their children. Women are primarily responsible for child-care in Somalia, meaning it will be difficult to separate women from their children – more so than for male defectors. Interviewees emphasised that women will not go anywhere without their children, so unless children can attend, women are unlikely to take up residential rehabilitation options. In the previous IOM women’s programme, dependents stayed with beneficiaries. There were reportedly some issues around whether two families could share a room, with their sons and daughters staying together – the types of issues that would need to be ironed out, in order for a residential facility to be run.

Interviewees suggested that a day centre might be the better approach for women, allowing them to sleep in their own homes at night. Day programmes could provide women with education, vocational training, psychosocial support and other reintegration assistance. In addition, a safe house could be created for particularly vulnerable cases.

When the idea of a day centre in Mogadishu was raised, women’s organisations suggested that women should be assisted in different districts from the ones they live in, as a means to prevent identification and stigma. So too, they suggested, these women should be assisted alongside other vulnerable women – and not together in one group as women formerly associated with al-Shabaab – in order to prevent them being marked as such and stigmatised. The point was made that local women’s networks should be utilised in this area of work, as they are not currently used in these efforts.

A different approach put forward, is that reintegration packages for men, should not only target individual defectors, but should also include members of their families. In terms of this approach, at least one female family member of a male defector should also be provided with education or skills training. So too, women should be included in the handling of their

---

63 The IOM scoping study, which considered this question, said that, “If women are to be housed at these centres, all agreed that they should be accompanied by their children. However, their response varied in terms of up to what age children should be able to accompany their mothers with some interviewee believing children as young as 5 or 6 should not be accompanied and others from the age of 7, 10, 12, 15 and 18. In terms of boys and girls sharing a room, all interpreted this question to mean siblings, and again ages varied with some believing they should be separated from the age of 6 to 15 or when they reach puberty.” Rapid Assessment of the needs of Female Defectors, Mission Report, International Organization for Migration, 2018.
64 Discussion with women’s organisation / civil society organisations, Mogadishu, 17 April 2019.
men’s financial reintegration packages. By doing this, even where women do not come forward for help, they will receive some help, through their status as wives, sisters or mothers of al-Shabaab men.

A related suggestion was that when there is a full family in al-Shabaab territory, it might be preferable to keep the family united. Options to explore could be allowing them to defect and rehabilitate as a family.

13. Women playing a part in men’s defection

Women play a crucial part in encouraging men to defect from al-Shabaab. Interviews reveal that a significant proportion of al-Shabaab defectors are encouraged to leave by their wives and mothers.

Defectors explained, “My aunt, mother and sisters played a role in my defecting. They used to call me. They would tell me they miss me and they need me. They would tell me to join them.” Another said, “At first when I joined al-Shabaab, my mother and other family were not happy. They disconnected me as long as I was a member of al-Shabaab. They would not pick up my calls or talk to me. Even if I got leave and came home, they would chase me away and say “You are not a member of us. You cannot come in”. But then when I decided to defect, my mother sent me money for transport and said to come. They have visited several times at Serendi, and the relationship has improved, and she arranged my wedding ceremony.”

Defectors described feeling bad about the worry they caused their families. “Being al-Shabaab, your mother, your siblings and your wife worry about you, because you are stigmatised and labelled as a terrorist. They are worried you will be killed. They played a big part in my defection.”

Many defectors cited the threat of divorce as the reason they left the group. Their wives threatened that if they did not defect, they would leave them. A Baidoa defector explained, “Women tell their husbands, you cannot attend to both the duties of being a husband and al-Shabaab.” He concluded, “A man cannot be without a wife, so he leaves.” A wife interviewed recalled that she had not seen her husband for three years while he was away with the group. She finally went to him and said, “I’ll divorce you if you do not come back to Baidoa.” Another wife said, “I used to advise him; to tell him what he is doing is wrong. I was convincing him to come back. Also his brothers and sisters joined me in this and also talked to him about coming back. I used to say, “If you want to stay in al-Shabaab, can you please divorce me. I’m still young. I need to have children.” When he heard those words, is when he decided to come back.” This same man’s brother would say to him, “You are not in position to do this. You have family responsibility. You do not have freedom of moment.”

Women would complain to their husbands about how hard it was when they were away. “My husband went away for months. No one would update me on his status; if he was alive; what he was doing. I told him I could not take it anymore. So he left the group. Then I followed him to Baidoa.” Another wife recalled that she kept telling her husband that life was hard and complaining about the fact that he was always away, before finally telling him that if he would not return she would leave. Another defector explained that he had daughters who were ready for marriage. His wife told him that because he was in al-Shabaab, no one would marry their girls, so she asked that he leave the group.
Mothers also had an influence. When asked who played the biggest part in encouraging his defection, a man said, “My mother. She would ask me on the phone to come back. Whenever I called her she told me that I should leave this group and come home. My father also asked me to leave. But my mother was a bigger influence.” Others agreed that their mothers were the biggest factors. “They were angry. Even my father did not contact me because of that. Only my mother communicated with me, asking me to leave the group.”

The wife and sister of a defector in Mogadishu explained that, “We helped him, by advising him – by telling him during his leave not to go back, just to stay on. That is what happened and how he defected. He was on leave and we convinced him to not go back.”

Women providing logistic support for defection

Women did not only provide encouragement – they also provided practical and logistic support which made it possible for men to leave the group. Many men served the group far from the towns from which they came. Some were fearful about what would happen if they returned – about whether they would be killed, harmed or arrested by security forces. Others needed financial assistance for transport out of al-Shabaab-territory or needed transport to be arranged for them. A defector explained, “Where I was operating, I didn’t know well the area, or which way to follow, so it took time to learn and process the defection.” Defectors explained how female family members helped with these arrangements.

Some women negotiated with NISA or clan elders, to get guarantees that if their sons left the group they would not be sent to military court or killed.65 One report tells the story of a former member of the al-Shabaab police whose mother “berated his superiors over the course of several days until they granted his release.”66 Another defector said that, “My aunt … connected me to a member of Parliament in the member state, who facilitated me getting to Serendi.”

Women provide financial support for men leaving the group – most commonly to pay for their transportation. “My wife participated in transportation. She got $20 dollars and sent it through the phone. At that time it was a Thursday, so I was able to access a phone.” Another defector recalled, “The only thing I needed was bus fare. They sent the money through the phone. When I had arranged money for transport and decided to leave from al-Shabaab, I asked one of the commanders that I needed to see my wife and children. They gave me a month. During that month, I got free. When I came to my home, I sold all my animals – my goats and camels. When I got this money I took my wife and children to come to Mogadishu.”

Another defector, who had been in the group for two years, explained that it was mostly his mother who encouraged him to leave. When he surrendered to government soldiers, they arrested him for four months. His mother supported him during those months. “During those

65 The Hard, Hot, Dusty Road to Accountability, Reconciliation, and Peace in Somalia, Vanda Felbab-Brown, May 2018, at 27.
four months, what I ate was what my mother paid for.” The place where he surrendered was isolated and cut off by al-Shabaab, with no transport links to government held areas. “That is why it took four months to get out, and why my mother did not have access. But she would send money for food for those four months.” His mother then paid for convoy to take him to the nearest air strip, and from there, she paid for a plane ticket for both him and an escorting soldier.

Assisting women in promoting defection
Understanding more about the part that women play in men’s defection, raises questions about whether this knowledge can be utilised to further encourage men’s defection. Some programming has been conducted in other countries, aimed at training mothers to identify signs of radicalisation in family members and to encourage men’s defection from armed groups.67

Thought could be given to how to build the capacity of Somali women whose husbands and sons are recruited, to encourage and to more practically support defection. Women could be targeted with awareness raising messaging, aimed at helping them advocate for their men to leave the group. Radio and media could be utilised in these efforts. Such messaging could include clear information about the amnesty programme, about rehabilitation offerings, and about the procedures by which defectors should be referred to NISA.

14. Life for women after their men defect

When men defect from al-Shabaab, the women in their lives are affected. Some families have to uproot and leave their homes, particularly if they live in al-Shabaab-controlled territory.

A defector explained that, “Some wives follow their men to non-al-Shabaab areas to wait for them, and others stay where they are and find someone else.” One defector explained that he had two wives by the time he left al-Shabaab, after thirteen years in the group. One of his wives was in Mogadishu at the time of his defection and she remained where she was. His other wife, who was living in al-Shabaab territory, remained where she was. He said she told him, “Since you left this group, you are no longer my husband.” After his defection she married another man.

Another wife left her home in al-Shabaab territory, because al-Shabaab were trying to marry her off to another man. Her husband explained, “When my wife left the al-Shabaab area, they took my home, my farm and tractor. My mother’s animals were taken too. My mother had to move too from al-Shabaab area. My wife and mother now live in the same area near Mogadishu. Our animals – 15 goats and a donkey – are gone.’

Many families move because of security concerns, fearful of retribution by al-Shabaab. “We left that place, so now we feel very secure. Now we stay in Mogadishu, where no one knows where we are.” The family of another defector explained that they had felt secure in al-
Shabaab territory while their son was in the group. However on the day their son defected, they moved to Mogadishu, as they were afraid al-Shabaab would come to ask where he was. Families describe feeling fearful after their boys defected. “Our soul is not feeling well. We know what we did is not good in terms of al-Shabaab. But we have not had any problems.” Another family member said, “Now, we are not feeling afraid. During the early days of defection we were afraid.”

A group of women in Baidoa explained that when their husbands defected, they left the villages they were living in and moved to Baidoa. Some received phone calls from al-Shabaab accusing them of no longer being Muslim. Al-Shabaab accused their husbands of drinking alcohol and chewing khat, telling them that they had been recorded in al-Shabaab’s books as non-believers. However, these women said that they had not been threatened personally. Other wives in Baidoa recalled how when their husbands were captured, al-Shabaab threatened their husbands with death.

Family members who remain in al-Shabaab territory are occasionally questioned by the group. A defector whose wife and mother remained where they were, said that they receive regular visits from al-Shabaab. “Al-Shabaab came to them and ask for me. They [al-Shabaab] say, “We know he is with you. We want you to tell us where he is.” So they say back to al-Shabaab “We want you to give us our boy.” This is the argument that they have.” Another defector ,whose wife is still in al-Shabaab territory, reported that al-Shabaab members regularly visit her to ask where he is. She tells them that he has divorced her, so they should leave her alone – even though it’s untrue and they remain married. Parents of another defector recalled how after their son left the group they received a phone call from al-Shabaab telling them to bring their son back. They replied that they did not know where he was and that the last they had heard he was with the group – despite them knowing he was already in a rehabilitation centre.

For some families, al-Shabaab’s actions have gone beyond threats. One defector explained that after he left al-Shabaab, one of his wives moved to a government-controlled area, while the other remained in al-Shabaab territory. When al-Shabaab heard he had defected, they held his wife and confiscated his home. Her father went and advocated for her release, before taking her to join the rest of the family in government-held area.

Despite these threats and challenges, most women say their lives have improved now that their husbands and sons have defected. A woman in Baidoa said, “Life is better now that our husbands have come back from al-Shabaab. Life was harder when they were in al-Shabaab. There was not enough food to eat. When we lived with al-Shabaab, most of the time our husbands were on mission and were not around. He could not provide for our family. Now he can provide for the family more.”

15. Conclusion

This report looked at women in al-Shabaab and sought to paint a picture of a lesser-seen side of the group – of the women actively supporting al-Shabaab; of the roles and influences of wives; of the experiences of women forced to associate with the group; and of the parts women play in encouraging male defection.

This study looked at women in al-Shabaab, as seen through the eyes of the men in the group – as well as through the eyes of their female family members. It is planned that in the coming
months this research will be expanded to speak to female al-Shabaab ‘members’ – seeking to see how their testimonies correlate or differ from those provided by the men. So too, it is planned that this research will be extended to include additional geographic locations within Somalia – such as Kismayo – to gain a further understanding about regional differences evident in the treatment and experiences of women.

Understanding more about the roles played by women, can provide added clues as to how to further degrade al-Shabaab and encourage its members’ defection. The recommendations that follow provide initial thoughts on steps that could be taken in this regard.

16. Recommendations

The following are some recommendations that came out of this research:

Rehabilitation services and facilities for women:
- **Need for assistance for women**: Given the shortage of assistance available for women who have left al-Shabaab, there is an evident need for programming targeted towards women in these positions.
- **Day center, as opposed to residential center**: A day center is a preferable model for assisting women, rather than a residential center.
- **Provision made for children**: As women cannot leave their children and child care duties, provisions need to be made for their children. If residential facilities for women are to be designed, these need to accommodate children, or women will not take up these services.
- **Oversight**: The FGS Ministry of Women should provide oversight over the rehabilitation of women.

Which women should be assisted?
- **Disentangling groups of women**: If assistance is to be provided to women, careful thought needs to be given as to which women will be beneficiaries. It is difficult to separate women actively participating in al-Shabaab, from al-Shabaab wives. Programming must decide whether to deal with all women associated with al-Shabaab together, or whether to address particular groups specifically.
- **Women actively participating in the group**: There is a clear gap in rehabilitation programming for women actively participating in al-Shabaab. IOM’s upcoming programme will focus on women who were not active participants in the group, meaning that the gap for these women will remain. If programming has a security rationale, it will be important to address this gap and to reach these women.
- **Al-Shabaab wives**: There is some evidence that providing assistance to al-Shabaab wives will encourage other wives to leave al-Shabaab territory, and might also make it easier and more viable for men to defect.

Screening:
- **Screening**: There is a need for the screening tool to be reviewed and tailored towards women, in order that it more accurately reflects the ways in which women contribute to al-Shabaab and constitute a risk to society.
- **Training for NISA screeners**: Once this tool is developed, training should be conducted for NISA screeners on how to properly screen women and on procedures for screening and monitoring women, as a means to reduce the inconsistency in the way that women are treated.
- **Female screeners:** There is a need for more female screeners, as women are better placed to screen other women.

- **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and guiding documents:** SOPs dealing with the reception of al-Shabaab defectors, as well as documentation setting out how defectors should be housed and treated – from reception, through to the end of screening – should be adapted for use with female defectors. So too, the Statement of Rights of Defectors should be adapted for women. Together, these documents could form a comprehensive female defection guidance package.

**Women encouraging male defection:**
- **Empower women to promote male defection:** Develop interventions aimed at building the capacity of Somali women whose husbands or sons are recruited, to encourage and more practically support defection. Such efforts would need to take into account possible security risks that might result from these efforts, and would need to mitigate such risks.

- **Awareness raising campaigns:** Develop awareness raising messaging, aimed at helping women to advocate for their men to leave the group. Messaging could include information about amnesty, rehabilitation, and procedures by which defectors can be referred to NISA.

**Newly liberated areas:**
- **Women in liberated areas:** There is a need to think about how best to support women in the context of areas newly liberated from al-Shabaab.
17. Bibliography


Escape from al-Shabab: 'I Was Turned into a Sex Slave', Africa, DW, 2018.


Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab, Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, United States Military Academy, 2018.

The Resilience of al-Shabaab, Christopher Anzalone, CTC Sentinel, April 2016.


18. Interviewees

Ahmed Ali, Centre for Research and Dialogue, 16 April 2019.
Amelie Runesson, Swedish Prison and Probation Service, Office for International Affairs, 29 June 2018.
Gemala Seruni, UNDDR, 28 June 2018.
Hawa, Baidoa civil society, 16 April 2019.
Jamie Kalil, Rehabilitation Support Team, 26 June 2018.
Minister of Internal Security, Baidoa, 15 April 2019.
Peter Olowo, RST, 20 Sept 2018.
Rowda, Mogadishu, 11 February 2019.
Suldan Farah, 23 June 2018.
Terri Judd, RST, 23 June 2018.
Tamas and Erica, 4 July 2018.

Other events
NISA screeners workshop, 19 November 2018.

Interviewees not specifically named
Beneficiaries of Serendi Defection Centre in Mogadishu.
Beneficiaries of IOM Defection Centre in Baidoa.
Wives and female family members of Serendi beneficiaries in Mogadishu.
Wives of IOM beneficiaries in Baidoa.
High risk detainees in Baidoa Prison.
Wives of high risk detainees living in Baidoa Prison.
NISA screeners, 15 April 2019.
Discussion with women’s civil society organisations, Mogadishu, 17 April 2019.
Headquarters
240 Blackfriars Road
London
SE1 8NW
United Kingdom
T: +44 20 7735 6660

Europe
Adam Smith Europe B.V.
Keizersgracht 62,
1015 CS Amsterdam,
Netherlands
T: +31 (0)20 520 7400

Africa
2nd Floor Cavendish
14 Riverside, Riverside Drive
PO Box 26721-00100 Nairobi
Kenya
T: +254 20 444 4388

Asia Pacific
Suite 103
80 William Street
Woolloomooloo
Sydney NSW 2011
AustraliaT: +61 2 8265 0000

North America
1712 N Street NW,
Suite 400
Washington, DC
20036
United States of America
T: +1 (202) 873-7626